Exploring Diasporic and Cultural Identity: A Study of Hmar Folk Narratives

Plan of Work

For PhD Programme

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INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study:

Diaspora, in simple terms, is the dispersal of people from their supposed homeland. This may be the result of the establishment of community groups outside their origin. Diaspora may both encompass physical displacement and cultural implications of being 'displaced' from one's origin. Diaspora and issues of cultural identity are interlinked as people moving to new environments often grapple with preserving their 'lost' or receding heritage as they integrate with the new environment. Stuart Hall (1990), in his seminal work, explores the relationship between diaspora and cultural identity. He states, "Cultural identity… is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being.' It belongs to the future as much as to the past" (Hall 225). He mentions that cultural identity is fluid and is continuously shaped by historical, social, and political forces, especially for those in a diaspora. Avtar Brah (1996) defines diaspora as "a concept that problematizes the notion of 'home,'" where she argues that it can be an imagined or real place where identity and belonging are continually negotiated (193). She implies that diasporic groups face a duality between longing for their homeland and forging new identities in their adopted spaces. In diaspora studies, the 'tension' between maintaining a distinct cultural identity and adapting to a new cultural environment is a recurring theme in diaspora studies. This is known as a hybridized form of identity. In this sense, Homi K. Bhabha (1994) argues that cultural identity in the diaspora is "produced through the ambivalence of hybridity" (58). It is suggested that diasporic individuals or communities create new identities by blending aspects of their native and host cultures.

The Hmar people, an indigenous tribal group from northeastern India, exemplify this connection of diasporic and cultural identity. Though one of the smaller tribes within the broader Mizo ethnic community, the Hmars trace their origins to a supposedly 'mythical' homeland called *Sinlung* (or *Chhinlung*). Since the tribe's history is purely tied to oral traditions being passed down, this imagined homeland, although its precise location remains a matter of legend and debate, serves as a powerful symbol of unity and belonging. The Hmar's collective identity is intricately tied to this origin, as it plays a significant role in shaping their cultural consciousness. Sharing this origin theories are the Chins of Myanmar (known to them as *Chinlung*), the Luseis of Mizoram (as *Chhinlung*), and the Kukis of Manipur (as *Khul*). Their rich oral traditions, including folk songs, stories, and rituals passed down through generations, preserve the tribe's values, social structure, and historical experiences. These folk narratives not only serve as entertainment but also as a crucial link to their past, encapsulating the tribe's encounters with colonialism, migration, and shifting identities. The arrival of British

missionaries in the 19th century profoundly impacted the Hmar community, as Christianity took root and led to significant cultural shifts. However, rather than diminishing their indigenous identity, the influence of Christianity merged with traditional Hmar practices, creating a hybrid cultural framework. The tension between modern influences and traditional roots continues to shape the Hmar identity today. Politically, the Hmar have actively sought recognition and autonomy, advocating for their rights within India's complex framework. Their folk narratives, which remain central to their cultural life, serve as a bridge between the past and present, helping the community navigate the ongoing negotiation of their diasporic and cultural identity in an ever-evolving world.

Diaspora typically refers to the dispersion of a population from a *real*, *identifiable homeland*, often *with a historical or documented migration*. It involves the physical displacement of people, who then maintain connections to their homeland or face cultural negotiations in new environments. In this sense, the proposed research may not fit the 'conventional definition' of diaspora. Regardless, although the Hmar people's connection to Sinlung lacks 'concrete' historical documentation or proof of physical migration (except for oral accounts), the concept of diaspora can still be applied *in a symbolic sense*. In diaspora studies, the notion of "home" does not always refer to a geographically proven origin; it can also be an *imagined place* that serves as a *central symbol* for a group's identity, values, and heritage (Brah, 1996). Also, this idea suggests that identities are not fixed but rather fluid and *constructed through the narratives and myths that communities share*. The idea of Sinlung functions as a 'mythical homeland' that plays a crucial role in shaping the Hmar tribe's cultural identity and collective memory. As Stuart Hall (1990) asserts, "Cultural identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the nation" (226). In this context, the narrative of Sinlung provides the Hmar people with a *cultural anchor* and a sense of shared identity despite the uncertainty surrounding its physical existence. The belief in this homeland binds the community together and offers them a narrative of origin that is passed down through generations, contributing to their sense of belonging. In this sense, the Hmar people refer to themselves as *Sinlung Suok*, which literally translates to 'of Sinlung Descent' regardless of whether *Sinlung* is factual. For instance, the Sinlung Hills Council, a state government-created development council for the Hmar people in Mizoram, exemplifies this cultural connection by not only representing the political goals of the Hmar people but also embodying their historical and cultural identity associated with Sinlung (*Government of Mizoram*).

Thus, the diasporic condition of the Hmar people can be understood not through the lens of physical dispersal but through the 'metaphorical' dispersal of their cultural identity across time and space. This 'myth of origin,' reflected in their folk narratives, helps the Hmar people negotiate their place in the world, especially as they encounter external influences like colonialism, Christianity, and modernization.

Research Questions:

1. How can the Hmar's supposed 'mythical' migration, as told in their folk narratives, be understood as a form of diaspora despite lacking historical proof? What does this mean for the broader study of diaspora and cultural identity?
2. How do Hmar folk narratives reflect their historical experiences and migration accounts?
3. What significance does Sinlung hold in the contemporary identity of the Hmar diaspora?
4. How do Hmar folk narratives serve as a medium for preserving and transmitting cultural and diasporic identity?
5. What is the significance of the Sinlung accounts and folkloristic lifestyles in contemporary Hmar socio-political and cultural life?

Objectives of the Study:

1. To explore how the Hmars' migratory accounts in their folk narratives represent a form of diaspora despite the lack of historical evidence.
2. To analyze how Hmar folk narratives reflect their historical experiences and the importance of *Sinlung* in shaping their cultural memory and identity.
3. To investigate how Hmar folk narratives preserve cultural identity and examine the role of folkloristic traditions in the tribe's socio-political and cultural life.

Review of Literature

Salman Rushdie (1991) and Alphen (2002) discuss how migrants and diasporic individuals create a connection to ancestral places through memory and cultural identity. Similarly, the Hmar tribe views *Sinlung* as an imagined homeland central to their identity, even though its historical authenticity is debated. Brah (1996) and Bell (2003) highlight the importance of home as both a mythical desire and a lived experience, while Bell introduces the concept of a 'mythscape' where national myths are constructed and renegotiated. Scholars like Mamun and

Noureen (2014) and Tickell (1998) further explore how migration influences national identity and collective memory. Chhangte's (2013) PhD thesis, *Mizo Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Content and Meaning,* analyzes the evolution of Mizo oral traditions, tracing their development from the pre-literate period through British colonization. He explores the origins of these traditions and their historical significance, including the term 'Mizo' and the cultural heritage of the Mizo people, emphasizing both pre- and post-colonial influences. Pachuau (2018) focuses on the politics of Mizo oral narratives, examining how colonization and Christianity shaped Mizo identity. She argues that religion has marginalized these oral traditions, pushing them into the background. Bapui's (2011) book *Oral Traditions of the Hmars* examines the beliefs and myths preserved in Hmars' oral traditions. Dena (2008) and Sakhong (2003) discuss the Hmar origin myths, linking *Sinlung* to various historical and mythical narratives, with Dena tracing possible origins in Central China or Shan and covering political movements for a separate Hmar homeland. Other scholars like Khawbung (2019) and Baite (2016) critique these origin theories, calling for deeper historical analysis, while government documents offer alternate interpretations, suggesting Sinlung could refer to places in China rather than a literal cave. Overall, the concept of Sinlung as a geographical and mythical homeland is a crucial cultural anchor for the Hmar tribe.

Literature Gap:

Although considerable scholarship exists on the concept of Sinlung as an imagined homeland and its supposed mythical status, as well as on the oral traditions and folktales of the Hmar people, significant gaps remain in the literature. Current studies primarily focus on the narratives surrounding Sinlung and its cultural implications, yet none have specifically examined how the Hmars' migratory accounts in their folk narratives can be understood as a form of diaspora despite the absence of historical evidence. Moreover, there is limited analysis of how Hmar folk narratives reflect the community's historical experiences and the role of Sinlung in shaping their cultural memory and identity. Additionally, the influence of folkloristic traditions on preserving cultural identity and their impact on the tribe's socio-political and cultural life have not been thoroughly explored. This proposed study seeks to address these gaps, offering a deeper understanding of the Hmar identity within the framework of diaspora studies.

Theoretical Framework

In exploring *diasporic* and *cultural identity* through the lens of tribal folk narratives, several theoretical frameworks offer valuable insights. Stuart Hall*′s* concept of cultural identity as fluid and constantly evolving provides a foundation for understanding how diasporic communities construct and reconstruct their identities through storytelling. His theory highlights the dynamic process of 'becoming' and 'being,' which is critical in examining how tribal narratives adapt across time and place. Homi K. Bhabha's concept of cultural hybridity further enriches this analysis, suggesting that diasporic identities are formed within a "Third Space," where blending native and foreign cultures produces new, hybridized identities. Postcolonial theorists like Edward Said contribute to this discussion by framing narratives as expressions of "imagined geographies," helping to explore how displaced tribal communities maintain connections to their homeland through storytelling. Additionally, Indigenous knowledge frameworks, such as those proposed by Linda Tuhiwai Smith, emphasize the importance of oral traditions in preserving cultural identity, positioning tribal folk narratives as vital to both cultural continuity and adaptation in diasporic settings. These frameworks offer a multidimensional approach to understanding how diaspora and cultural identity are negotiated and expressed in tribal folk narratives.

This study will draw on concepts from diaspora theory, cultural memory studies, and postcolonial theory to explore how Hmar folk narratives construct and preserve cultural identity. Diaspora theory, particularly the works of scholars like Homi Bhabha and Avtar Brah, will provide a lens to understand how the Hmar tribe engages with the idea of a 'mythical' homeland (*Sinlung*) in shaping their diasporic consciousness, even without concrete historical evidence of migration. Bhabha's notion of cultural hybridity and fluid identities will help in analyzing how Hmar narratives negotiate between traditional values and external influences such as colonialism and Christianity. Cultural memory theory, following Maurice Halbwachs and Jan Assmann, will frame how collective memories of *Sinlung* are passed down through generations, functioning as a symbolic anchor for the Hmar people's identity and belonging. Postcolonial theory will aid in understanding how Hmar narratives resist and reinterpret their experiences under colonial and missionary influences, maintaining their unique cultural and socio-political identity. By combining these theoretical perspectives, the research will critically assess how Hmar folk traditions act as a medium for cultural preservation and identity negotiation across time and space.

Research Methodology

Research Design:

This study employs a *qualitative research* design centered on a critical analysis of Hmar folk narratives to explore how these stories shape and reflect the tribe's diasporic and cultural identity. A qualitative approach is particularly suitable as it allows for an in-depth examination of the symbolic, cultural, and historical dimensions embedded in the oral traditions of the Hmar people.

The primary sources for this research will consist of collections of Hmar folktales and relevant texts, which serve as vital repositories of the tribe's narratives, cultural values, and historical experiences. These texts will offer valuable insights into the significance of *Sinlung*, the imagined homeland, along with recurring themes of migration, colonial encounters, and identity formation. Additionally, secondary sources, including scholarly analyses and historical accounts, will be incorporated to contextualize Hmar folklore within broader socio-cultural frameworks.

Thematic analysis will be employed to identify and interpret themes and motifs within the collected narratives. This analytical framework will allow for a systematic exploration of how migration, colonial experiences, and contemporary challenges are articulated in the folk narratives, ultimately contributing to a deeper understanding of the Hmar tribe's diasporic identity.

Limitations:

This study is subject to certain limitations, including the reliance on oral traditions, which may vary in interpretation across different members of the Hmar tribe. Additionally, the supposed 'mythical' nature of Sinlung poses challenges in verifying historical accuracy, though this study focuses more on the symbolic significance than on empirical validation.

Tentative Chapterization

Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the study. It outlines the research background, objectives, scope and significance. The introduction also establishes the theoretical framework and methodology adopted for the analysis.

Chapter 2: Diasporic Consciousness in the Hmar Imagination and Oral Lore

The second chapter explores the idea of diaspora within the Hmar community. It examines how diasporic consciousness is reflected in their oral traditions, myths, and collective imagination.

Chapter 3: Cultural Identity in Hmar Folk Narratives

This chapter focuses on cultural identity and enculturation as represented in Hmar folk narratives. It highlights the processes of enculturation, through which values, beliefs, and traditions are transmitted across generations.

Chapter 4: Hybridity and Cultural Negotiation of the Hmar People in Contemporary Spaces

The fourth chapter discusses the tension between tradition and transformation. It analyzes how hybridity and cultural negotiation shape Hmar identity in modern and globalized contexts.

Chapter 5: Findings and Conclusion

The final chapter presents the key findings of the research. It summarizes the major insights, draws conclusions, and suggests possible directions for further study.

Bibliography

Appendix

Possible Outcomes

1. The study may reveal that despite the absence of historical documentation, the Hmar migratory accounts in their folk narratives serve as a symbolic form of diaspora, where collective memory and oral tradition create a sense of displacement, migration, and belonging, thus reinforcing a shared identity centered around movement and resettlement.
2. The research could find that *Sinlung*, the supposed mythical homeland, plays a pivotal role in Hmar folk narratives, functioning as a symbol of unity and cultural connection. Sinlung's significance in these narratives may demonstrate how historical experiences of migration and colonial encounters are preserved in the collective memory, shaping the tribe's cultural identity and their perception of homeland.
3. The study may hypothesize that Hmar folk narratives are key in preserving the tribe's cultural identity, acting as a medium through which traditional values, customs, and historical experiences are passed down. It could also highlight how these oral traditions impact the Hmar tribe's socio-political and cultural life, sustaining resilience and cohesion in the face of modern challenges while maintaining a connection to their roots.

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